
What's Standard Operating Procedure? or, By the Book

Marie Olson Spencer

I am a firm believer in the usefulness of procedure manuals. To paraphrase the words of one of my favorite detectives, Hercule Poirot, "One must have the method, Hastings. Without the method, there is no order. Without the order, one can solve nothing. Enfin, one must have method." Since the dictionary defines a procedure as "a particular way of accomplishing something or of acting,"¹ and each step (procedure) in an activity leads to the next until the activity is completed, it is useful to have written directions documenting those steps. Perhaps this belief in the validity of written instructions springs out of my technical services background. Catalogers refer constantly to procedure manuals: *AACR*, *Dewey Decimal Classification*, *MARC Formats for Bibliographic Data*, to name a few. Each of these tools was developed to solve the very problems that arise when several people are performing the same kind of work at different times, in different circumstances.

Ideally, each staff member should be so well-versed in all aspects of every library task that she or he needs no written guidelines; but in the real world of librarianship, how many of us encounter the ideal? What happens when half your staff is stricken with the flu and technical services staff must substitute at circulation, while the children's librarian is harriedly manning the reference desk? Who answers such questions as, "How do I record this patron's check for a damaged book? What do I do about this audio kit that was returned without the cassette? Where in the world do they keep the fax forms and instructions?" Your usual sources of information, the regular staff members of these departments, are absent. These substitutes are capable, intelligent people, knowledgeable about every aspect of their own jobs and well-versed in general library procedures. But, each department is different. Adjustments have to be made for the idiosyncracies of clientele, physical plant layout, and variations in levels of technology.

To be effective, to be efficient, and to be consistent, there must be some written guidelines available for the staff to consult when questions arise. This is one use for a procedure manual — a resource for solving problems.

Training and Teaching Tool

How does one learn to do a job well? Certainly one of the most effective methods is to watch the performance of someone who does the task well and emulate those actions. Actual experience, walking step-by-step through each aspect of each task and performing these steps repeatedly can also be effective. And, of course, one might study written, detailed discussions of the various aspects of the job and then attempt to apply these descriptions to the task at hand. In reality, a combination of all three methods is necessary. But the types of tasks performed also determine which learning method — and teaching method — works best.

Manuals are a necessary part of the training process. For example, watching someone process a book and then doing the same task is a very good way to learn how to process materials, because it is a physical procedure and most effectively learned by doing. Processing can also be a complex task, and there may be variations in how your library treats circulating books as opposed to reference or archival materials. Similarly, items that are acquired infrequently demand a well-written procedure manual — something to instruct the processor on their handling, so that when these items do appear, she or he will be able to process them properly. If the processor is absent, and materials *must* go out, the procedure manual will serve as a resource for whomever is designated to process materials in the interim.

Manuals are also an integral part of the continuing education program necessary in a changing organization. Let's address the questions that arise when your library's circulation system is automated. What is the best way of reinforcing the hands-on training that indisputably is necessary in this process? Our library issued a regular newsletter that became, in effect, a supplement

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to the vendor's procedure manual, detailing all the oddities and inconsistencies of our particular system. Again, because not every puzzling situation occurs regularly at every desk, and because a supervisor is not available every second of every work day, there must be some written procedures available — not only to settle disputes, but also to help instruct those who are serious about learning to do their jobs effectively.

This, then, is the second beneficial aspect of having procedure manuals — they function as learning/teaching tools. I hasten to add that such materials are not meant to be stand-alone items. There are no substitutes for good, intensive, personal instruction and hands-on experience. But many people function better if they have a concrete list of steps to follow, rather than having someone talk them through an activity.

How does one utilize a procedure manual for training? One suggestion would be to base such activities on the problem-solving process defined in *Management Science: an Introduction*. It proposes "a six-step framework as follows:

1. problem recognition, observation and formulation
2. model construction
3. solution generation
4. testing and evaluation of solution
5. implementation
6. evaluation⁷²

Begin by using the manual that was developed, along with other training procedures. The first step is always an introductory/observation period, permitting the new employee to see the lay of the land. (step 1) Secondly, the employee is walked through these procedures, using the manual as a guide. (step 2) Third, the new employee is permitted to do carefully limited tasks, either observed, or closely checked by a supervisor. (step 3) Fourth, additional tasks are added to his or her work day. If problems occur, or the employee falters, references to the manual and walking through the tasks again, helps him or her recognize where the difficulties lie and how to find a solution to them. (steps 4 & 5) When the training period is completed, the new employee should be able to function effectively alone and know where to look for assistance when problems do occur. (step 6)

Throughout the training process, the employee is encouraged to take time to read through and carry out the directions in the manual. It should be emphasized that the procedure manual is a *guidebook*, rather than a rule book, which is the function of a policy manual. Encourage him also to realize that in dealing with people, flexibility is an important attribute. Sometimes the spirit of

the law is more important than the letter and, as a result, sometimes rules are broken. *BUT*, the purpose of a procedure manual is to insure consistency of performance, even when rules are bent. Therefore, providing guidelines to handle an exception to policy becomes a useful part of the procedure manual.

This all sounds easy and uncomplicated in the abstract, but the demands of a real-life work situation may not permit this step-by-step, easy-does-it approach to training. Even in the busiest settings, time given to the reinforcement of procedures is a savings in the long run. Far less supervisory intervention is needed, saving both salaries and egos, when support staff can work relatively independently, because they are able to "go by the book."

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Team-Building Tool

Where does one acquire "the book"? Libraries, of course, differ in the development of procedure manuals. Our library has always had a loosely-organized collection of departmental procedures which had simply evolved through the years without much thought given to their interrelation. Moving into a large, new building, where departments were physically separated, and automating our circulation system, provided the impetus for redefining and merging these procedures into one manual. As the staff trained together in automation procedures, questions arose about "How does the Circulation Department handle this?" and "Why does the Children's Department do it that way?" and "How do we deal with such and such when the system is down?" Out of the latter type of question arose the aforementioned newsletter and out of the former, a determination to create both a staff policy handbook and a collective procedure manual. The professional staff, in monthly meetings, began planning for both publications. For various reasons, the policy handbook was developed first and provided excellent training for the work involved in compiling the procedure manual.

Every department began reviewing their existing manuals, noting where changes had been made and which procedures were likely to be misunderstood or performed incorrectly. Additionally,

they indicated where their tasks "crossed over" into another department's venue. Because support staff were on the front lines and had to deal with both the task-related problems and public relations results of changing technology, their input was considered crucial. Furthermore, they were generally the target audience for our manual, simply because they were the ones who performed most of the tasks, and were most apt to be shifted about. Everyone was asked to outline the steps he or she took in performing each task undertaken. From these outlines, the basic structure of each department's manual began to emerge. Department heads reviewed and annotated each other's drafts prior to handing print-outs to the support staff. Support staff annotated the rough drafts and handed them back to their supervisors. The refined rough drafts were passed out to support staff in other departments to determine whether the procedures were understandable to the "outsiders" who might have to refer to them.

There was an unexpected benefit to creating the procedure manual: the interaction and personal involvement of the professional and support staff resulted in a pleasant sense of accomplishment and created an awareness of what goes on in other parts of the library. "We not only go by the book, we wrote it!"

Retraining and Reinforcement

While basking in the afterglow of a job well done, one small question kept niggling at us: can "the book" ever truly be finished? *Dewey Decimal Classification* is in its twelfth edition. If the staid world of cataloging is routinely revised, can a procedure manual for the ever-changing organism that is the public library be expected to remain static? What provisions can be made for changes in procedures? Who assumes responsibility for documenting those changes? Should revision occur regularly, or on an as-needed basis? Technology is refined constantly, necessitating changes of varying degrees in the simplest transactions. Our sign-on procedures, for example, have been refined four times, each change making it easier to access the system, but aggravating the procedure manual writers. For the sake of consistency and usefulness, each change should be documented and entered into the manual. To do otherwise is to defeat the whole purpose of the manual.

This leads to the questions of who revises the manual and when should it be revised? It seems to me that this is a perfect opportunity to reinforce the importance of, and stimulate staff interest in, the manual. On a regular basis — whether monthly or quarterly will depend on the institu-

tion — each section of the manual should be reviewed at departmental meetings and changes noted. It is important to understand that *constant* revision of procedures may be counterproductive and should not be undertaken lightly. In fact, constant changes in procedures may be symptomatic of a larger problem with library policy. Procedures may be waived at the supervisor's discretion, but if this happens constantly, perhaps it is a *policy* that needs changing rather than the procedure. A case in point is the registration of young people at New Hanover County Public Library. Having previously required all people under the age of eighteen to have their application cards signed by a parent or guardian, the library began permitting sixteen-year-olds with a driver's license and a part-time job to apply without that constraint, if the circulation supervisor approved it. When this procedure became so commonplace as to be standard operating procedure, it was decided that a policy change should be effected. Therefore, any resident above the age of 16, presenting a driver's license or Department of Motor Vehicles identification card, can now be issued a card without parental consent.

"We not only go by the book, we wrote it!"

Some procedural changes are less difficult to implement, but it is wise to think through the ramifications before doing so. It's easy enough to decide to change the format of your spine labels, for example, but how will that change affect your shelvees and the public? A discussion among the technical services staff and further discussion with reference and circulation personnel (who deal directly with the public and are going to bear the brunt of any complaints or problems) should be mandatory before the change is carried out. Again, you are reinforcing the sense of teamwork and "oneness" by doing so.

Once the procedure is changed, an appointed support staff member from each department, on a rotating schedule, should then be sent to the individual charged with editing "the book" and assist with entering the changes pertinent to that department, as well as reviewing other departments' submissions. This assures that the same "outsider's" viewpoint is maintained and is effective in clarifying murky directions. The assistance might range from actually keying in the data to simply observing as this is done, but it is interaction, rather than action, that is important here. That staff member should also be responsible, on

this rotation, for informing his/her co-workers about *all* library procedure changes and inserting the update(s) into the department's copy of the manual.

Will a procedure manual solve all your staff problems? Will every person take the accumulated wisdom poured into the document and treasure it until his or her dying day? Will people even remember to consult the thing? The answer to the first two questions is probably, "Are you kidding?" But the answer to the last questions depends on you. If you stress the importance of self-reliance, awareness of library practices and how one series of actions creates reactions elsewhere, your support staff is bound to think of the procedure manual as a valuable resource, rather than a last resort.

References

1. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam Company, 1967), s.v. "procedure."
2. Davis, K. Roscoe, Patrick G. McKeown, and Terry R. Rakes. *Management Science: an Introduction* (Boston, Mass.: Kent Publishing, 1986), 15.



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